As the Carter library has recently declassified large amounts of the documents relating to Jimmy Carter’s presidency, and is in the process of declassifying the rest, a reappraisal of the Carter presidency is in order. Recent content lists in important journals covering contemporary diplomatic history, such as *Diplomatic History* and *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, reveal that researchers are doing just that. Hardly an issue goes by without at least one such article. The quality of these articles varies. While Darren J. McDonald’s article raises important questions regarding Carter’s foreign policy, the answer it provides is not entirely convincing.

Darren J. McDonald’s argument is comprised of two parts. The first premise is that President Carter focused on the Palestinian issue because his foreign policy was faith-based. According to this argument the connection between Jimmy Carter’s faith, through the First Baptist Church, and the Palestinian issue is a moral one, based on a desire to put an end to the suffering of the Palestinians. McDonald asserts that Carter “viewed the Palestinian issue in moral and ethical, rather than strategic terms” (455). The second part of the argument, which follows from that premise, is that it was Carter’s incessant focus on the Palestinian issue which “hindered the peace process” (455).

Of these two main arguments a very good case can be made for the second – if Carter had given up on the Palestinian issue earlier he might have been able to save time and domestic political support in pursuit of a limited Middle East peace. Although this is undoubtedly true, such a limited peace was a hindrance for the more ambitious comprehensive peace which Carter aimed for. Hence, Carter’s decision to not drop the Palestinian issue was due to his desire for a more ambitious peace. While it is certainly true that religion might have inspired Carter to be a peacemaker, the format of that peace was clearly based on a strategic evaluation. The first half of McDonald’s argument can be refuted by looking at the primary sources found in the archive.
While there is no doubt that Carter was a religious man, and that much of his interest and knowledge of the Holy Land initially came from his reading of the Bible, this does not mean that he was not strategically minded. When McDonald argues that the Palestinian focus “emerged from the idiosyncratic nature of his [Carter’s] religious beliefs” (464) rather than strategic considerations, he ignores the fact that Carter’s comprehensive approach was based on a very strategic evaluation shared by much of the State Department’s Middle East community, the CIA, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance.¹

William B. Quandt, who was Brzezinski’s Middle East advisor, has described this political agreement over how to approach the Middle East: “A rare degree of consensus therefore existed among the president, his top advisers, and the bureaucracy.”² At best, this means that Carter’s religious view just happened to match the strategic analysis of the other policy-makers.

The strategic decision this foreign policy team made was not that the Palestinians needed to be pitied on humanitarian grounds, although the human rights aspect was also important, but that the inclusion of the Palestinians as a political party was essential in order to make the peace comprehensive. The Palestinian issues – refugees, the occupied Palestinian territories, and Jerusalem – were seen as the core of the conflict. If the core problem was not solved, the conflict would continue to fester. Unless the peace was comprehensive, Carter and his foreign policy team argued, it would not last. This was also the analysis the administration was handed from the State Department in a transition document which was cautionary in terms of exactly how to approach the Palestinians, but there was no doubt that they had to be part of the solution.³ To McDonald’s credit, he includes a paragraph on this advice and the fact that the National Security Council agreed, but this does not change his argument (465-466).

The point here is not to refute the claim that Carter was religious – he was – but that his faith contradicted strategic considerations – it did not. While Carter’s memoirs contain many religious references – one need only look at the titles, Keeping Faith and Blood of Abraham – the policy discussions found in the archives are thoroughly strategic evaluations of the situation in the Middle East.⁴ A careful reading of McDonald’s article


² Quandt, Camp David, 37.

³ Arab-Israeli Dispute, 14 January 1977, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, RAC Project Number NLC-17-111-6-2-2.

shows as much. None of the footnotes that reference documents from the Carter Library have anything to do with religion. True, religion rarely surfaces in diplomatic records, but thorough strategic discussions do. When it is clear from the archives that Carter and the strategists agreed on the approach towards the Palestinian issue, then clearly this consensus was not based on religion alone.

McDonald repeats his faith-argument, but he does not add adequate empirical evidence and he refrains from commenting on alternative explanations. A good example of this problem emerges when McDonald claims that “Carter’s policy goals for the Palestinians grew from the benevolent missions he read about in the Bible: feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, securing political rights, etc.” (466). The argument might be enticing, but it is unconvincing. If Carter’s policy was indeed based on the moral ideas of “feeding the hungry,” why did he not propose a humanitarian solution for the Palestinians, such as taking in Palestinian refugees or starting a massive foreign aid programme? Furthermore, if Carter was so intent on bringing the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) on board as a religious calling—why did he adhere with extreme strictness to the U.S. pledge of no negotiations with the PLO? Carter’s Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, Harold Saunders, who had participated in formulating the pledge under Henry Kissinger, has admitted that there was room for manoeuvre.5

A deeper understanding of why Carter and his closest team of advisors held on to the idea of a comprehensive peace for as long as they did is sorely needed. When Menachem Begin came to power as prime minister in Israel and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat travelled to Jerusalem it should have been abundantly clear that the comprehensive approach was becoming almost impossible to achieve, yet Carter soldiered on. In fact the first time Carter explicitly (yet temporarily) gave up on the comprehensive approach was in a meeting with Begin in late March 1978.6 Was Carter’s continued support of this approach simply based on religious faith, or was it based on the analysis that a partial peace is a weak peace? All the material from the archives and the documents that inspired Carter’s approach point to the second argument. To quote the 1975 Brookings Institute report, co-authored by Brzezinski and considered one of the most influential documents for the Carter administration’s Middle East policy: “[a]s long as there are irredentas that one or more of the parties passionately believes are unjustly annexed or held, no boundary incorporating those irredentas will be secure.” In other words, unless peace was achieved on all fronts involving all the warring parties, conflict would break out again. That the Palestinians were one of those parties is not a question of Carter’s “desire to emulate Jesus, the Prince of Peace” (455), it is the conclusion of a realist’s analysis of the conflict.

While McDonald’s attempt at providing an answer to the puzzle of Carter’s longstanding commitment to the comprehensive approach is welcome, it is unsatisfying. The problem with the article is not so much that it emphasises that religion played a role in shaping Carter, but that it presents a false dichotomy between

5 Christison, Perceptions of Palestine, 175–176, 336.

6 President’s Meeting with Prime Minister Begin, 22 March 1978, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection Box 36, Serial Xs – [8-88 – 8-78].

religious belief and strategy. While the argument can be made for a link between Carter’s religious values and his strategic evaluations of the Middle East, there is no credible evidence for McDonald’s argument that Carter followed one, but not the other.

There is much to applaud in Darren J. McDonald’s study of President Jimmy Carter’s faith-based foreign policy. He successfully illustrates the inattention this area of scholarship received until the post-911 era when religion finally became a subject that diplomatic historians could no longer ignore. Indeed, the hearts and minds of principal actors, including presidents and their particular religious interpretations, provide a murky and slippery path to navigate, but McDonald bravely eschews the creaky crutch historians have traditionally steadied themselves upon— notions of civil religion—in favor of a closer examination of “personal faith” and the “religious dimensions” of Carter’s mind (453). As McDonald points out, old approaches to the subject “would end up analyzing the decisions of a Christian president, not those of President Carter, the Christian” (454).

The lens through which McDonald attempts to draw the line between Carter’s faith and his decision making in foreign affairs is Carter’s theological interpretation of justice. He correctly connects Carter’s sense of justice as “doing the right thing for those who need it most” to Carter’s theme for his administration’s foreign policy, human rights (458). Further, he argues, this focus on justice was a principal driver in Carter’s aim to seek a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, including a homeland for the Palestinians. He also cites Carter’s claims of being sensitized to human rights by his experiences in “the Jim Crow South” (465). However, other religious beliefs and interpretations of Carter’s (besides his sense of justice) might also be worth exploring to augment and clarify Carter’s actions. In addition, the use of contemporaneous sources in the analysis might provide a more nuanced, or even contradictory picture of Carter’s claims of racial sensitivity as well as point to other aspects of Carter’s mindset that may have been of equal or even greater influence on his efforts to bring peace to the Middle East.

Although McDonald outlines Carter’s religious heritage and successfully illustrates the rich broth of born-again certitude in which Carter’s belief system was macerated, he stakes his argument too narrowly on Carter’s sense of justice. What about Carter’s revivalist sense of salvation; of the trinity of sin, redemption, and salvation? How might that be connected to his reaction to Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s apparent disregard for United Nations Resolution 242, which was at the heart of territorial issues related to the Palestinians? What about Carter’s repetitive invocation of a common heritage between Jews, Christians, and Muslims as descendants of “the blood of Abraham”? How did this religious construction play out between the parties at Camp David? Were Carter’s and Begin’s profoundly incompatible definitions of peace, which emanate from their respective religious traditions and familial experiences, a source of friction and misunderstanding? What of Carter’s sense of evangelical mission, and his high ambition and autocratic leadership style? Just prior to convening the talks at Camp David between Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Carter ambitiously scribbled in his notes “First Eg/Jewish peace since time of Joseph


Jeremiah.” Did Carter’s ambition to be seen as an historical world leader supplant motivations emanating from his faith-based sense of justice?

As for the connection that McDonald draws between Carter’s racial sensitivities and his commitment to justice as President, when one lines up the evidence and analysis created and recorded at the time, rather than relying on revisionist memoirs and later accounts, the connection appears less durable. Relying upon actions and statements made years after the fact, while tempting or convenient, can push an historian into an anachronistic pit. For example, many have lauded Carter’s statement in his gubernatorial inaugural address in 1971 that “the time for racial discrimination is over,” citing it as evidence of his obvious abhorrence of racism. But, its inclusion in his speech was not his idea; one of his significant campaign contributors, retired Air Force colonel David Rabham, made Carter agree—in writing—to say it in exchange for his continued support during his campaign for governor. In addition, Carter himself engaged in race baiting to attract segregationist voters loyal to outgoing Governor Lester Maddox and neighboring Alabama Governor George Wallace, which was well documented by journalists and historians at the time. Finally, in Carter’s own words he characterizes his leaving behind his boyhood friends—“the black boys of Archery [Georgia]”—as a personal rite of passage into “adult roles in an unquestioned segregated society.” It may be more accurate to say that while Carter was clearly troubled by racism later in life, and while he would like us to believe that he was earlier in life, for the most part he went along to get along as he was pursuing his political career in the 1970s. Similarly, while Carter did characterize the behavior of Israel toward the Palestinians as apartheid in his 2006 book, Palestine, Peace Not Apartheid, this invocation by Carter may have been due to his observations of South Africa after his presidency rather than providing evidence, as McDonald argues, of a “link in his mind” back to the injustices of the Jim Crow South (465). Again, projecting recollections and statements made years later back in time to explain someone’s actions at the time is fraught with interpretive peril.

McDonald further argues that Carter’s “handling of the Palestinian issue threatened his chances of getting to Geneva” where, with the cooperation of the Soviets, he hoped that substantive negotiations between Israel, Egypt, and that the Palestinians would produce a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. (466) There is

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3 Notes of Jimmy Carter, Plains File, Subject File, Box 28, Folder: Mid East: Camp David Summit President’s Working Papers, undated, JCL. Strikeout in original.

4 Jimmy Carter Inaugural Address as Governor of Georgia, January 12, 1971, Carter Family Papers, Jimmy Carter Speech Files, Box 64: Gubernatorial Address—Notes, Drafts, 1/12/71, JCL.


little doubt that Carter suffered (especially domestically), as McDonald points out, from being the first president to advocate a homeland for the Palestinians. McDonald’s best use of primary research is applied in his detailed rendering of Carter’s failed pursuit of a Geneva conference. However, Carter’s failure to bring this about had absolutely nothing to do with his handling of the Palestinian issue. Rather, Sadat, who above all else did not want the Soviets involved in the negotiations, preempted the entire exercise.9 While the inclusion of McDonald’s analysis about Carter’s failure to convene the Geneva conference illustrates an extraordinary political miscalculation by Carter, and while he does include Sadat’s preemptive actions, this might better be described as the point in time at which Carter lost control of the process altogether, becoming little more than a superpower facilitator throughout the remainder of the process including the subsequent talks at Camp David. Carter’s greater strategic error may have been his stubborn refusal to adjust strategies that were designed with another much more moderate Israeli leader in mind—Shimon Peres. Early in 1977, Carter and his advisors thought Peres, who had taken over after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s resignation, would surely be elected, but instead, Begin won the election in May.10 Yet, Carter pursued his first set of plans without considering the very real differences between the two leaders.11 In the end, Begin got largely what he wanted, while Carter lost to Republican candidate Ronald Reagan, and Sadat lost his life.

The mindsets of presidents, including their religious convictions, are a critical area of examination for diplomatic historians, especially in an era when religion is fully ensconced in the political sphere as it has been since the middle 1970s. The aim of linking such mindsets to policymaking holds the promise of great illumination. One must take great care, however, to develop the entire complex of religious interpretations any given president might have while weighing their relative expression against other intellectual dispositions. The evidence must also be processed in a manner that respects its locus in time.


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9 For Sadat’s views on the Soviets, see CIA Report on the “Soviet Role in the Middle East,” June 1977, NSA—Brzezinski Donated Historical material, Country File, RAC ESDN# NLC-6-50-2-9-9, JCL.

10 See Minutes of Policy Review Committee meeting #13, April 19, 1977, Brzezinski Donated Historical Material, Box 24, Folder: Meeting PRC 13: 4/19/77, JCL.